



Alexandria Times

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Out of the Attic

The Mount Vernon Cotton Factory, cont.

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Image: The dummy in the cupola. Alexandria Library Special Collections.

Following the Civil War, the building at 515 N. Washington St. had a variety of owners. Abijah Thomas gave it a try in 1866, but when he was unsuccessful in reviving the cotton factory's success, two of his creditors, Turnbull Baxter & Co. and First National Bank of Alexandria, sued each other. The lawsuit eventually found its way to the U.S. Supreme Court, which ruled that the case needed to go to a lower court for rehearing.

In 1877, Robert Garrett of Baltimore bought the factory for \$33,000 and closed it to prevent competition for his company in Maryland. In 1900, the building was re-sold by Garrett's heirs to Henry Chipman of Baltimore for \$12,000. In 1902, the building was put up for public auction, and the winning bid came from Harry and John Aitcheson. But the Aitchesons didn't buy the building for themselves. Instead, they bought it for the Robert Portner Corporation.

The building's second life began as part of the Portner Brewing Company operation. For the next 16 years, the building was the bottling house for Portner Brewing. The 1894 remodel of the Brewery left 515 N. Washington intact. But the 1916 prohibition adopted in Virginia ended the Portner run as the largest employer in Alexandria. As the 18th Amendment to the Constitution outlawed the production of beer nationally, Portner sold the building to the Express Spark Plug Factory of America, which used the building until 1928.

In 1935, the factory was converted into the Bell Haven Apartment House, where among its more interesting inhabitants was a 6-foot dummy that occupied the cupola. We assume it is a successor of this tenant that can be seen there today. Rumor had it that the dummy was placed there by a policeman trying to capture the murderer of the night watchman. Given that Michael Kiggin was killed in 1854, and the earliest mention of the dummy is from 1919, this tale seems unlikely. In the 1930s, the dummy was kidnapped from the building and hung from the Taft Bridge on Connecticut Avenue in the District of Columbia. D.C. police were surprised to find that what they thought was a man in the water with a rope around his neck was, in fact, a dummy. It turns out the dummy was made by a Department of Agriculture official while the department occupied the site in 1919. The Mount Vernon Cotton Factory was converted into office buildings in 1981, but has since been renovated back into residences. You can still see the dummy in the cupola.



"Out of the Attic" is published each week in the Alexandria Times newspaper. The column began in September 2007 as "Marking Time" and explored Alexandria's history through collection items, historical



Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

images and architectural representations. Within the first year, it evolved into “Out of the Attic” and featured historical photographs of Alexandria.

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